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ABSTRACT

Mainstreaming of handicapped children in regular classes requires the stretching of normal individualized teaching methods to include meeting the needs of handicapped or gifted learners. A learning loop consisting of diagnosis, educational prescription, instruction, and evaluation should be applied. Instructional strategies appropriate for both handicapped, exceptional, and regular students include varying the grouping, varying the pace or rate for each student, establishing an accepting and congenial environment, varying the materials, varying the adult and peer helpers, and matching teaching and learning styles. Competition should be minimized and open communication with the parents maintained. (DB)

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STRETCHING STRATEGIES:

INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING FOR SUCCESSFUL MAINSTREAMING

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Stretching is in no way a catchword. In the context of this paper stretching means extending. Stretching is understood as programming for children with "disabilities" as an extension of programming for the range of "abilities" found in a classroom group of 25 or more students.

There is no mythical group standard for exceptional students. Standardized texts, standardized tests and standardized students are useless concepts for children with learning disabilities or handicaps. Stretching does not imply that all that is needed is extra patience or another pair of hands in the classroom.

The methods or strategies of individualizing provide an ongoing framework for the programs and classroom management for all children. So that teachers feel confident that these methods will meet the needs of a group in which exceptional children are mainstreamed, the stretching concept is put forth. Historically, it was special education classes which first demonstrated that individualizing is feasible and workable with exceptional students. Currently, many regular classrooms are equally successful with individualizing to meet student needs. Accordingly, the placement of exceptional students in the regular class does not have to cause undue concern. The mainstreamed program that is individualized will work well. In a sense, then, this paper may be seen as the stretching of individualizing of special education into a new setting -- the individualized mainstreamed classroom -- and stretching the program for 'regular' students into greater diversification.

The first step is building teacher confidence. This starts with the reaffirmation of certain basic premises. These include:

1. Exceptional students are basically more alike than unlike their fellow students.

2. Non-exceptional learners have 'problems' that require special help.

3. The learner with exceptional problems has areas of talents that are not exceptional.

4. There is a continuum of talent among the students in any class or group in the building.

5. Traditional teacher-determined deadlines, uniform materials and competitive grading are not responsive to the needs encompassed in the continuum.

6. Individualizing provides the tools for responsiveness.

7. The exceptional child in the regular classroom simply serves to reinforce an individualized instructional design for the successful school experiences for all students.

Individualized learning is not to be equated with individualized instruction or a one-to-one teacher ratio. Rather it is the adaptation for each student of needs assessment, prescribing or planning for his skills achievement, and decision making on procedures to follow in order to reach the goals established for each learner. This represents a Learning Loop. Individualized learning is the management of the daily life of a class; it is the format upon which the daily life takes shape. It is the means by which the exceptional and non-exceptional students can feel equally successful in school.

The Learning Loop can best be described as follows: relative to each teacher, diagnosis or needs assessment means going beyond a pre-test or diagnostic exercise. It means for some exceptional students that diagnostic procedures must be "stretched" to include problems, deficits or blocks inherent in a learning disability. Diagnosing for exceptional students may have to include an array of items such as significant memory problems, fine motor tremors or hearing impairment resulting in marginal communication skills. Teachers may have to learn to administer and program from new and more sensitive instruments and include more and more non-academic behaviors.

Written tests as disgnostic instruments are apt to become less and less the method of choice for obtaining diagnostic information on handicapped students. More

and more diagnostic procedures will have to include listening, observing and demonstrations because of the predictable problems some exceptional students have taking written tests or reading.

Prescribing or planning for each student must be adapted to handicapping conditions. Abbreviated attention span, emotional instability and physical fatigue are examples. In deciding on a learning contract whereby the student then proceeds, problem areas are considered. The individually written or oral contract, as a classroom method of choice, must of necessity reflect the learner's level of functioning, the way he can learn and the way he chooses to learn. The time limits or target dates for completion must be an individual matter -- in no way can the palsied youngster write as fluently as his non-handicapped classmates. Prescribing for learning objectives through a student-teacher contract also has the important dimension of affording every student the opportunity to make decisions, and to carry them out successfully. The basic contracting procedure includes providing for changes when necessary to that an incompleted contract need not represent failure for the student. An incompleted contract must be viewed as the wrong contract.

"Stretching" applies the procedures that teachers and students may require in order to complete the learning contracts. The "teaching" of handicapped children frequently requires teachers to work in new media, forego verbal presentations, depend on written materials duplicated in sand, braille or wood, or discover new cassettes and music for the students who cannot move ahead without them. The use of tutors and machines need to be considered as important practices, not discounted as inferior or mechanistic. Above all, as detailed later in this paper, the teacher will have to stretch class program to include multiple opportunities for the class to dwell in the affective domain. Unless the handicapped child, regardless of age or grade placement, accepts himself and has a positive self-image, all other learning strategies offered to him may be to no avail.

The final step in the Learning Loop is the assessment -- or the evaluation of

the student's work. Evaluation of all students takes into account the progress made in academics and often includes social, attitudinal or affective growth, too. For exceptional students evaluation must be "stretched" to include progress in the remediation of certain learning disabilities and changes in adjustment.

Successful individualizing does not require fancy equipment, special training or a particular faculty or team arrangement. It starts with one teacher and his/her decision to set up a learning environment with many options. These options, in effect provide the tools whereby the diagnostic, prescriptive and evaluation procedures for a mainstreamed class may progress smoothly.

Before proceeding with the strategies recommended for the daily life of a class, it is appropriate to introduce one further tool which coherently pulls together assessment and school placement and procedures for children with learning disabilities. The Spice Chart of Learning Disabilities encompasses a wide range of potential and talent -- from the child incapable of academic strides through the gifted child who has become a disabled learner. In a mainstreamed classroom, this attractive wall-chart is a handy reference for diagnosing and planning for any learning difficulty a student may have.

The daily life of the class will depend, to a large extent on the implementation of the methods of individualizing. None of the methods are difficult. None of them are really new. Successful teachers have programmed for individual boys and girls without the formal description of the strategies. But spelling out the strategies -- stretched for exceptional students is useful and can help build teacher confidence.

1. Vary the Grouping: Classroom groups of various sizes are usually based on student interests, learning styles, a broad learning theme, problems or, skills achievement levels. Stretching grouping practices to meet the needs of exceptional students does not have to be awkward or conspicuous. It may simply mean grouping, for some part of the class time, non-exceptional and exceptional students together,

several exceptional students together to work on a particular remediation program and suggesting the 'group of one' for the boy or girl who needs time alone. Diagnosis of learning difficulties serves as an important priority in group placement and includes subtle matters of peer interaction, attention-seeking habits, evidences of self-degradation, as well as perceptual or cognitive lapses. The membership of each group is important to consider in the placement of some hesitant learners -- taking into account personality problems, competitiveness and need for one-to-one interaction.

The group of one, a student apart from others, further, is a chance to be free of distractions, of social pressures, to be unobserved by others, to be hyperactive or to slump and rest. It may be welcomed by any student in the room. For the worn out crippled child or blind girl, it is essential.

Individualizing practitioners recommend that groups remain together for an average of five days. Considering the difficulties that some very slow learners have, this number of days may have to be extended.

There may be groups of students that require the leadership of support services. Although these groups may be primarily for exceptional students, it is suggested that groups do not need to bear labels. If feasible, these groups should include non-exceptional students and allow for all students to serve as tutors or teachers.

2. Vary the Pace or Rate for Each Student: The basic disability of exceptional students predetermines that they cannot proceed according to a pace established for a large group. Six pages Monday through Thursday and a test on Friday is teacher determined pace and there are few, if any class members for whom that is the best timing. For the child with perceptual or memory problems, or the student in need of manipulative materials, that calendar does not make sense. The teacher's role in individualizing the daily life in her room is well defined as a guide. The task is to assist students in selecting the amount of work they undertake to complete within a time that is commensurate with their skills and the difficulty of the work.

Exceptional students with learning problems should not be put under the pressure of time. When they are forced to compete with, or keep up with the pace of non-impaired learners, they may react by blocking, misbehaving, stopping or attacking. Permitting students to proceed at their own rate is important for establishing a success-oriented program. As the class program moves away from fixed time blocks to small group activities and interest centers, the focus on the clock diminishes. This serves to take the pressure of rate of completion of assignment off the student and reinforces opportunities for in depth study and enthusiasm. Student selection and self-pacing frees a teacher to interact with small groups or individuals as the activities in the room are "stretched" to the student's rate of learning.

3. Establishing an Accepting, Congenial Environment: Many teachers have expressed concern, anger and dismay when talking about mainstreaming. They frequently say that they are ill-prepared and are already overworked! But mainstreaming is already a way of life in many areas and teachers can feel confident. But teachers are entitled to encouragement -- to be reassured that everyone benefits from working with a blend of talented and limited-talented students together; that the methods of individualizing do work and that an environment of congeniality can be established and maintained. Without a feeling of teacher confidence, the classroom environment will foster feelings of anxiety for all.

Congeniality is the by-product of feelings of success and a cooperative, not a competitive atmosphere. In addition, by permitting expressions of feelings and values, and working with the teacher who relates in an open way with the students congeniality is strengthened.

In an environment of multiple options, the child with certain disabilities may need considerable structure and consistency. This may include a need to have a special place to work. Too many stimuli, both visual and auditory, may be seriously upsetting to the student with perceptual problems while the physically handicapped student may bet exhausted having to weave his way around too many desks or pieces

of furniture. In short, the classroom environment -- the physical arrangement of the room must allow for privacy, simplicity, lowered stimuli and predictable patterns. Architectural barriers, heights of sinks, toilets, fountains, and pencil sharpeners can be adjusted to wheelchairs. Slippery floors may need to be carpeted for the awkward gait of a retarded child.

4. Vary the Materials: In order to successfully mainstream exceptional children in a regular class, there must be multi-materials to meet the range of abilities. The basic classroom teaching methods needs to be away from a single text or programmed series to many books and resources. Interest centers of manipulative materials, mostly student-made, are recommended. It will be worthwhile to approach community resources for specific materials for specific learning exceptionalities -- braille books, oversized print flash cards, tactile materials, and the like. Discovery materials become more important considering that many handicapped children have limited discovery experiences, opportunities or capacities; yet are faced with endless hours of leisure time. Such items as typewriters, mechanical drawing equipment, arts and crafts materials, sand figures, formboards, puzzles and even a balance beam may become standard classroom equipment.

5. Vary the Helpers: Some experiences that many handicapped children have known outside school, have left them suspicious and angry at adults or unusually demanding and dependent. Although necessary, many of the adult contacts - medical or otherwide -- were frightening and negative for the child. Therefore, relating to staff at school may be difficult. Too many adult-child relationships may be overwhelming. The student may be more comfortable and productive if he works with one or two adults in the course of the school day. In as much as different teachers use different strategies or methods, have different expectations in terms of class behavior or academic work, some exceptional students end up more confused because of the inconsistencies. These inconsistencies are apt to be internalized in terms of self-doubt,

discouragement and lack of self-acceptance. Therefore, a well planned program of limited, preferably student selected, teacher-student contacts appears sensible. Students who have a history of emotional upsets should have a chance to work intensively with one adult because of the problems inherent in overcoming feelings of hurt, rejection and mistrust.

For some students, when work with special services or community helpers is considered essential, it is important that faculty member or homeroom teacher assume the role of the student's advisor or advocate. This person then strives to assist all staff working with the student, as far as possible, to have similar expectations for behavior and academic work. This affords the student a sense of solidarity.

As helpers, all students should be involved in a peer tutoring situation. Research points out that many students learn more from other students than from adults. All youngsters have talents -- and teaching to others is reinforcing and rewarding. Careful orientation and employing peer teaching as a universal classroom procedure prevents the possibility of the handicapped students feeling resentful or put down as they receive help from fellow classmates.

Expressed in another way, learning objectives for handicapped children are stretched beyond the academic realm to include the remediation of learning difficulties and/or adjustment problems. Because of the resulting complexity of such objectives, a fixed lesson schedule and inflexible, preplanned lessons or content become irrelevant. The handicap of the learner will determine some of the objectives, the schedule he can follow and the complexity of the content. The student with emotional problems requires an intensive program geared to one small success followed quickly by another. Unlike some of his fellow classmates he has learned to live with failure and is afraid of success. He needs to experience the many successes which flexible content, schedule and objectives allow. Individual learning contracts effectively combine these strategies.

Teaching students with learning disabilities may be somewhat simplified if

certain patterns are observed. If a student insists on repeating certain content or a specific drill, or a student goes to the same interest center again and again, it may be that it is the only content area in which he feels successful, or wanted or free of competition or can manage to slide by. By observing the student and then answering the questions about the content, changes and additions may be made. It is not possible to program a student who cannot or will not be programmed. Schedules may regulate the seat to be filled and the time to fill it, but learning takes place within the learner, regardless of seat assignment and time slots. Therefore, teachers need to have the freedom to avoid rigid programming and should not be locked into lesson plans that certain exceptional students cannot handle.

Students will generally improve in budgeting their time, an important part of learning. Some impaired students have a poor sense of time so that a clock orientation means little to them. This is not to be regarded as being irresponsible but perhaps as a sysmptom of a perceptual problem.

6. Matching Teaching and Learning Styles: Teachers have as much right to say what they like best about teaching as students have the right to say what they like best about school. Most teachers express a desire to be free to teach in their own styles, select their own agenda, programs and materials and sometimes helpers as well. Each teacher wants to be respected as an individual, not just as a member of a department or a grade level team. When the classroom format of individualization is ongoing, teachers are freed up to make such choices and to teach in the style that they like best. A teacher who likes to lecture will lecture to those students who prefer to learn from lectures. But the teacher who draws or maps things out, can also follow that teaching style to help students who learn best with that kind of help. For exceptional students, a variety of teaching styles may need to be available, in order for him to get the maximum benefit from the staff. The advantage of team teaching is that more and more hands are there to help, but perhaps more teaching styles are available as well.

Competitive education has inadvertently damaged many students. There is no place for competition where exceptional and non-exceptional students are grouped together. The benefits of individualized learning are negated at such point as letter grades or numbers are introduced. Teachers must take a firm stand that grades can be disastrous and apprise administrators of this. Students and parents must be presented with other statements and data about the child's progress. Parents must be helped to understand and accept the merit of non-competitive evaluations.

For the ongoing evaluation which contract learning provides, certain guidelines for communications with parent are suggested:

1. The conference permits the students to collect all the completed contracts, records, skills chart accomplishments and certain test results to re-evaluate prior to the conference.
2. The student be permitted to be involved in all the planning for the evaluation to prevent any 'surprises' that might undermine the trust between the teacher and the student. This is particularly important for the emotionally upset child.
3. Parent-teacher-child conferences are a method of choice because there is no way that the child can lose sight of the fact that his school work is the primary concern.
4. Students who have unsteady home relationships need the openness, no-hidden-agenda-approach of the parent-teacher-child conference, and this protects the stability of the teacher-child situation.

This represents a considerable "stretch" from a letter or number grade on a card.

The sunshine call to the parents should be brief, frequent, and on any level.... personal or academic. These calls can add remarkably to the improvement of self-acceptance so basic to the emotional world of all students, especially the handicapped.

7. The Affective Domain: The learning environment and the actual content of the affective curriculum represents the flavor of the classroom. The environment is established by many observable actions and subtle innuendos, such as seating arrangement, interest centers, plants, which say to each class member, "This is a safe place to be. The people in here care about each other." The affective curriculum is the more formal way of helping children recognize and express their feelings.

Each teacher handles the affective content according to what feels most comfortable for him/her. Affective curriculum permits a teacher to show emotions other than anger, and shares him/herself. School then becomes a more relevant place for all students. The teacher may be the only emotionally stable person in a child's world. This is a frightening idea, but very true. It does result in students modeling from the teacher, and endorses the legitimacy of feelings content in the class.

Individualized learning opens up the daily life of every class to permit work in the affective domain. It can be the most rewarding part of work with children.

Mainstreaming is controversial -- the outcome for some exceptional students is considered risky. At the same time it is an exciting concept, both humanitarian and democratic. No, it is not a matter of returning to the one-room school and working out lessons for the boy in the Dunce cap and the Town Brain. Mainstreaming reaffirms the advancements we have made in programming for classes and for students.... advancements called "The Strategies of Individualized Learning" and combines these advancements with the expertise that has serviced special education classes in the immediate past. This combination can meet the needs of teachers and students as well. The exceptional child in the regular classroom does not deter others from learning but enhances his learning and living world!